The Disconnect Between the Science and Practice of Management

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Recently, the HRNet was host to an unsolicited discussion. The lively repartee between its researcher and practitioner camps illustrated what many have known or suspected for years: Academicians are often accused of being out of touch with the "real world." Indeed, the American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) took a similar position in criticizing the doctoral curriculum of business schools and the emphasis on research. Practitioners are seen as unwilling or unable (or both) to use research findings. There is a major disconnect between HRM research accomplishments and HRM practitioner needs—so much so that many in each camp see little redeeming social or professional utility of those associated with the other camp. It has not always been like this. In fact, the situation is a relatively recent phenomenon.

Although there has never been what could be called a close collaboration between researchers and practitioners, the present strained relationship has deteriorated quite a bit from that which existed about 60 years ago. Around that time, research in HRM was problem-driven, as illustrated by a look at the early research on absenteeism and turnover. Companies had difficulties with these issues, so researchers (and practitioners) searched for answers. The Hawthorne studies were an interesting illustration of this collaboration. The Western Electric Company was interested in determining the effect of light illumination levels on productivity. Many Harvard professors—F. J. Roethlisberger, W. Lloyd Warner, T.N. Whitehead, Elton Mayo—were involved in the design and interpretation of this and other studies conducted at Western Electric. In the preface to Roethlisberger and Dickson's (1939) *Management and the Worker*, Elton Mayo wrote:

> Collaboration in work of this kind presumes not only an active relation between workers of the university and of the industry, it presumes also a relation between institutions. The aid given by Harvard University has been as admirable in its way as the freedom to inquire and the support given by the company....
>
> One other comment must be made. Researches of this type are usually impossible because of a foolish convention that institutions engaging in industrial research are expected to "pay their way" or "earn their keep." This means, in effect, that any such institution, living from hand to mouth, is committed to the futility of endless repetition of some former discovery....This confusion of research with commercial huckstering can never prosper....
>
> Can anyone doubt the need for inquiries of this type?

Although not many would doubt the need for such collaborations, there has been a distinct lack of follow-through in developing these types of business-university partner relationships.

> *Yes, the breach between business research and real world corporate needs can be fixed—if scholars will answer the challenge.*

What Is the Purpose of Academic Research?

The major academic goals of business scholars are publication and tenure. Although an admirable objective would be to solve pragmatic problems in business, this does not necessarily fit in with the goals (or the reward system) for researchers. Moreover, we academics are trained to generate knowledge in our disciplines, not solve organizational problems. Universities have successfully maneuvered Schools of Business away from pragmatic research into the methodologies used successfully in the behavioral and hard sciences. But these systems are not conducive to research that concerns itself with practical problems. Much of our research has become methodologically or data-driven, rather than topic-driven.

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It is important for us to ask rhetorically, "Is the research that has been conducted concerned with the wrong topic or is it unintelligible?" The answer is a resounding NO! Academic researchers (employees) have merely done what is required by their universities (employers) to be approved as tenured faculty members. We have successfully served one of our key constituencies. That which is rewarded has a tendency to be repeated—this is still true, and will continue to be true.

What Do Managers (and Others) Really Think of Academic Research?

To ascertain what opinions managers really have of scholarly business research, we administered a five-item questionnaire to 113 human resource managers at a recent conference, asking the following questions:

1. To what extent are you familiar with any academic research in management? 1 = to a very little extent, 2 = to a little extent, 3 = to some extent, 4 = to a great extent, 5 = to a very great extent. (Mean = 3.11)
2. To what extent is management research performed by university professors applicable to real world problems? (Mean = 1.67)
3. To what extent have you ever used academic research to solve a practical problem at work? (Mean = 1.45)
4. To what extent do you believe that when advances are made in human resource management practice they will be made by academic researchers? (Mean = 1.15)
5. To what extent do you agree with the following statement: "Academic researchers understand the contingencies of operating within an organization." (Mean = 1.36)

Overall, the results of this questionnaire indicate that HRM practitioners are relatively familiar with research performed in this area, but they fail to see many practical implications of it. As such, they are not at all confident that academic research will prove to be a panacea for their management efforts. Nor are they convinced that we are using our research time to investigate the correct problems. The connection that once existed between researchers and practitioners has become rather frayed, if not torn apart.

Is the disconnect just between researchers and practitioners in human resources management? Or is the chasm more generalized? We asked a number of our respective state representatives for their opinions on the applicability and quality of university-sponsored research. To a person, this not-so-random sample reported the research to be inapplicable, trivial, immaterial, and irrelevant. It would seem, then, that even legislative representatives fail to hold university-sponsored research in high regard—a perception that has been building for some time. Remember Senator William Proxmire's "Golden Fleece Award," which was given to a research project that, according to Proxmire, held little practical use?

So our initial speculation was correct. There *is* a disconnect between researchers and research constituencies. And these demonstrations indicate that it exists to a substantial degree.

A Specific Example of the Disconnect: The Case of Graphology

In a recent issue of *Inc.* magazine, Bianchi (1996) reported that there has been a rapid increase in the use of handwriting analysis, or graphology, to assess an applicant's personality, motivation, and integrity. The article was an uncritical presentation which left the impression that graphology is a potentially helpful addition to the selection process. In fact, in a sample of data we recently collected from 35 HR contact people from *Fortune* 500 companies, five reported that graphology was a part of their selection or promotion process.

Conversely, the *International Journal of Selection and Assessment* recently contained an academic article by Driver, Buckley, and Frink (1996) that reviewed all the available evidence and reiterated what is known by most academicians: Research clearly shows that graphology and graphologists fail to make reliable and valid diagnoses of personality and motivation. The authors came to the conclusion that graphology has no place in a competently run selection process and should not be used by managers concerned with developing an effective selection system.

Do many academic researchers read *Inc.*? Do many HRM practitioners read the *International Journal of Selection and Assessment*? We don't know the answer. We do suspect, however, that neither group has done well at communicating, and a disconnect has resulted. This gap has been facilitated further by what we call "Airplane Magazine Syndrome." Many managers who fly often and who read the information supplied by the airlines' in-flight magazines have recently learned that graphology *is* a valuable tool in the selection process and that managers can quickly "size up" their subordinates.

Such simplistic information fails to account for the contextual variables of individual firms. But these publications lend much credence to the idea that management is a simple discipline. Cooperation between the research and practitioner camps should ensure that the pseudo-scientific process of graphology would *not* be used in hiring practices.

Where Are We and How Have We Arrived at This Point?

The traditional gap between what practitioners expect and what researchers can reasonably deliver has widened alarmingly. Bridges are infrequently crossed between those who are involved in management and those who conduct research on human resources management, as shown by the recent discussion on the HRNet. It sometimes seems as though researchers and practitioners speak a different language. A recent anecdote describes the president of a high-tech firm whose eyes "glazed over in seconds" when presented with research concerning the management of high-tech firms. In his recent Academy of Management presidential address, Donald Hambrick (1994) expressed apprehension that management scholars have had little tangible impact on current HRM practices in companies. This is not just speculation or illusion—the disconnect is real.

Making Our Research More "Useful"

Many have written about the need to conduct "useful" research. The point of contention is how to define "useful." Most ideas center around the notion of focusing equally on research issues and subsequent implementation concerns. Lawler (1985) suggests that if research is to be useful, it must meet two fundamental criteria: (1) the outcome must facilitate practitioners' understanding of organizations and result in improved practices; and (2) the outcome must contribute to the theory and body of knowledge generated in the science of management.

Others have written that much of the progress in the organizational sciences has been diluted by our strict adherence to the "scientific method" in the design and conduct of academic research. It is often difficult to fit real world problems and settings into the scientific method. In fact, numerous business situations actually preclude the application of science. Frustration results from trying to select and assign research subjects randomly in a field setting. Moreover, during our academic preparation we are trained to pay allegiance to our academic discipline, not to any constituency. Our goal is to perform "useful" research that incrementally moves our discipline forward. Many of us have followed—and continue to follow—that dictum throughout our careers.

"It sometimes seems as though researchers and practitioners speak a different language."

Conflicting Goals and Expectations for Research

A major difficulty with respect to research is the goals and expectations relative to our respective constituencies in the following areas:

1. Theoretical vs. Pragmatic. As academicians, one of our goals is to contribute to the theoretical knowledge of a phenomenon. Does one theory predict organizational issues better than another? This contrasts with the more pragmatic approach of our non-academic colleagues, who are concerned with the notion, "Will this help me to manage better?"

2. Data-Supported vs. Logical. Imagine the horror of an academic journal referee if we attempted to present an empirical question with a purely logical response. Our empirical research consists of data supported with limited generalizability. Non-academic colleagues collect data in a more qualitative fashion and use logic to generalize the evidence they observe.

3. Scientific Method vs. Case Examples and Common Sense. Our academic education has deeply ingrained the scientific method into our psyche. It pervades much of the research in human resources management. On the other hand, non-academics are guided by case examples and common sense. Academicians deride these as "man who" studies—"I know a man who does...."

4. Academic-oriented vs. Practitioner-oriented Journals. Our academic journals are technical in nature and have a bent toward tight scientific methodology. Practitioner journals are written in a more result-oriented fashion with an emphasis on understandability and applications.

5. Tenure vs. Organizational Effectiveness. Although we as academicians are interested in the effective functioning of organizations, achieving tenure is our major goal. Tenure affords us the freedom to inquire into our areas of interest. At major research institutions, publication in the premier academic journals is a necessary condition for tenure. Influencing practicing managers, however, is not the primary goal of these journals.

Frankly, university reward systems are *not* designed to facilitate practitioner-oriented research. As adherents of the academic model, we have done nothing but follow the guidelines and hurdles that have been developed for a successful academic career. Apparently, following these guidelines effectively puts us at odds with those who believe one of our primary purposes is the facilitation of front-line management.

Haven't We Made Any Practical Contributions?

It would be disingenuous of us to try to convince practitioners that all the research done has applications to real management problems and issues. Indeed, some of the research conducted fits in nicely with our goal of advancing the discipline incrementally. There is a great deal of research, conducted by us and others, that does not yield real world applications. On the other hand, as Michael Hitt (1995) so ably pointed out after reviewing recent issues of academic journals:

> *"Do practicing managers need more and different 'proof' to accept the veracity of information presented by academics in academic journals?"*

> Admittedly, I do not have expertise on all of the topic areas on which the articles focused. However, in each issue I was able to identify one (often several) articles that had clear and important implications for managers.

We agree with Professor Hitt, believing that a great deal of research has far-reaching implications for public policy and management practices. Most practitioners probably don't read scholarly management journals. But most practitioners should have read a management text during their educational preparation, and anyone who reads a textbook would learn of some practices that would facilitate the effective management of most firms. A textbook on performance appraisal would teach that such traits as personal maturity and so on are difficult to measure and should not be included in performance ratings; rating dimensions should be behaviorally based so that they are legally defensible. Or, if your turnover rate is relatively high, you might use a weighted application blank to determine the relationship between certain variables and propensity to turnover. Distressingly, our survey data of 143 *Fortune* 500 HRM practitioners reveal that, despite the availability of a lot of practitioner-oriented information with many practical implications, the information is largely ignored because of the disconnect.

Interestingly, the growth and impact of "popular" management texts has increased exponentially in the last few years. Take a look at the management titles available at your local bookstore. Who writes many of these texts? A number are penned by traditional academic researchers who are merely writing for a different population and hope to have some impact on the practice of management. Many of the most popular and influential books are *not* written by "traditional academic researchers," but by consultants (M. Hammer, T. Peters), practitioners (A. Grove), or academics (such as J. Kotter) who base their writings on consulting experience rather than mainstream research. This raises a question: Do practicing managers need more and different "proof" to accept the veracity of information presented by scholars in academic journals?

Repairing the Disconnect

We can choose either to ignore the chasm between the science and practice of management, or we can try to repair it in some way. There seems to be little point in ignoring it if we really do wish to see our research as useful and relevant. So we need to consider ways to fix this disconnect.

Business-university partnerships. Partnership arrangements between corporations and universities are not new; indeed, they have existed in engineering and the physical sciences for quite some time. However, business-university partnerships are relatively new to the field of management in general and to HRM in particular. In the past 10 or 15 years, several of these HRM partnerships have emerged between private sector corporations and such educational institutions as Cornell University, Boston University, the University of Southern California, and the University of Illinois.

There appear to be a number of similarities in how these partnerships are structured and how they operate. But because we have much more information about the University of Illinois partnership, we turn to this as an effective example of how academics and practitioners can work closely together to craft research projects resulting in improved HR practices.

An important issue in the development of these ventures is whether the oft-conflicting goals of academic researchers and practitioners can be adequately reconciled. The Center for Human Resource Management (CHRM) is a partnership arrangement between HR faculty from both the Urbana-Champaign and Chicago campuses of the University of Illinois and senior HR executives from companies throughout the country but heavily concentrated in the Midwest. Currently, CHRM has more than 20 partner firms, including such corporations as Amoco, Ameritech, Caterpillar, and Motorola. CHRM was started in July 1991 with the main purpose of generating applied research funded by revenues generated from annual partnership fees paid by the Center partners. It provides for truly collaborative relationships between faculty and HR executives, who serve as partner firm representatives. This collaboration includes the governance of the Center and virtually all decisions pertaining to its operation.

The research process actively involves partner executives in identifying the issues and problems in their firms on which they would like to see research conducted. These issues and problems are attached to the annual call for research proposals sent to faculty, who may then write a proposal specifically aimed at one of these partner suggestions. The CHRM executive board, consisting of equal numbers of partner executives and faculty members, reviews all research proposals on their merits and decides which of them to fund. One benefit of the research process for faculty is that when a decision is made to fund a proposal, there is an implicit agreement that at least one of the CHRM partner firms will allow the research to be conducted in its organization.

By its design, the formal research process of the CHRM lessens the distance between what academic researchers believe are important topics to investigate and the organizational issues and problems of concern to HR executives. Furthermore, the active collaboration of both researchers and executives in selecting projects to fund facilitates the usefulness of research and effectively "reconnects" research and practice. And the formal meetings of the CHRM (known as "Partner Roundtable" meetings) provide opportunities for partner-faculty interactions that can promote more of a shared perspective on the importance of particular researchable issues, further repairing the disconnect between research and practice.

The value of such business-university research partnerships is perhaps best viewed from the comments of the CHRM partners/executives themselves:

"The unique value of the Center comes from direct involvement of active business partners. Partners play a central role in determining issues for research, providing sites for research, and analyzing research findings. The payoff is research that has real world applications for the partners. The Center offers practitioners a unique opportunity to enhance the human resources function in corporate America."

—R. Wayne Anderson, Senior Vice President, Amoco Corporation

"I believe it is very worthwhile to have this interaction between academe and corporations. It is important to have research done that is application oriented."

—Evan Davis, Vice President of Human Resources, James River Corporation

"The distinctive offering of the Center for Human Resource Management is its genuine responsiveness to the interests and needs of its partner companies. The time horizon on research to be performed by the fine faculties of the two University of Illinois campuses fits with the ROI expectations of partners. Lastly, the faculty and partners network well."

—Patrick J. Canavan, Corporate Vice President and Director of Global Leadership and Organizational Development, Motorola, Inc.

Accessibility of information and accountability. Quite a bit of information from academic research is available to practitioners. However, it is reasonable to question whether we have done all we can to make this information accessible by communicating it in a manner that is understandable. Different professional subcultures seem to develop their own jargon, which becomes a shorthand of sorts, allowing communication "economizing" because of a shared understanding of the jargon. This manner of communicating, however, is dysfunctional for comprehension by those outside the professional subculture, effectively creating barriers and rendering such information inaccessible and virtually useless. Academic research published in our top-level scholarly journals provides a good

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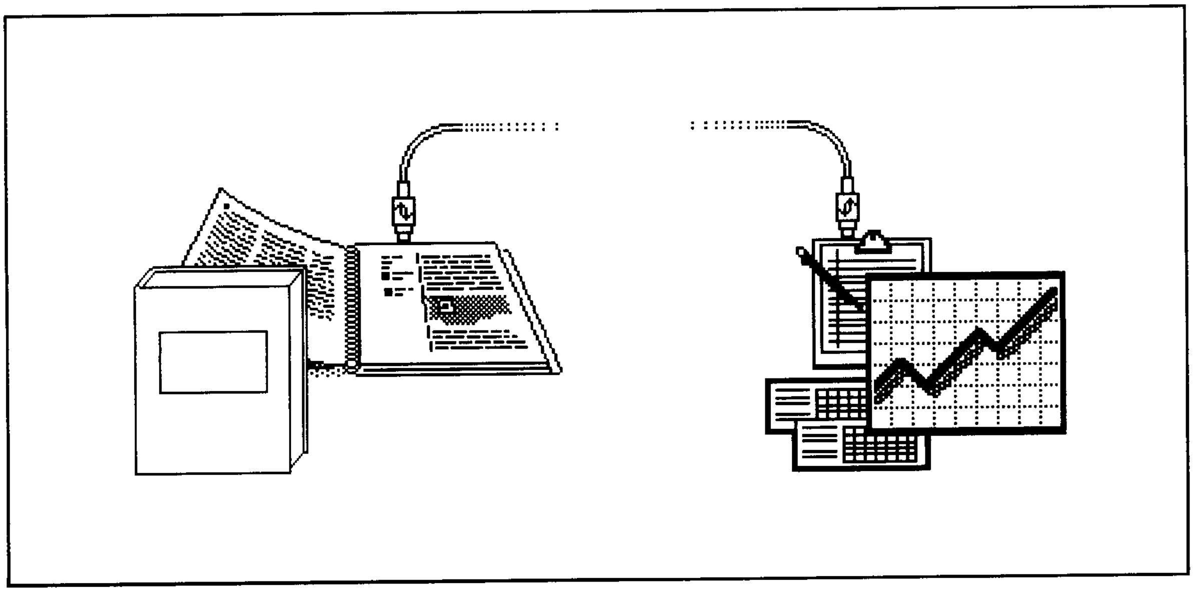

example of this; the information presented in such articles may be potentially useful to practitioners, but it is inaccessible in its present form.

What are the best ways, then, to increase the accessibility of research findings? This is a difficult question to answer without raising the issue of accountability in research reporting. In business-university research partnerships like the CHRM at the University of Illinois, accessibility of information is guaranteed because funded researchers are specifically accountable for writing a report of the research results for their executive partners in "user friendly," application-oriented language. However, such partnerships are quite limited in number, and the accessibility of research results is created for only a small number of practitioners and consumers.

In the bigger picture, such accessibility will not change substantially until we alter faculty performance evaluation and promotion systems to reconfigure the behaviors for which we hold faculty accountable. Specifically, we need to legitimize behaviors designed to repair the disconnect between research and practice that might include publishing in practitioner-oriented journals. Of course, such efforts would not be designed to replace traditional criteria of publications in scholarly journals, but rather to expand the domain of acceptable publication outlets.

Business experience for professors. The trend is quite clear among management professors: Surveys conducted in the past three decades have indicated that their managerial experience has been on a distinct downward slope. Moreover, teaching in business schools has become less applied and more theoretical in the recent past. This supports the concerns of many that today's management professors have minimal practical experience and may not possess the ability to integrate problem finding and problem solving across business functions through an understanding of real business world problems. Perhaps we just don't have experience with methods that can be applied in actual business settings.

The solution appears to be quite simple: We need to work more closely with our constituencies—those firms and organizations that use the knowledge we generate and the graduates we produce. Funds from businesses, philanthropic foundations, and private donors should be sought to provide opportunities for faculty to use sabbaticals, summer breaks, internships, "scholars-in-industry" programs, or other periods of released time to work within an organization or study the inner workings of a functioning firm. As the AACSB (1991) suggested:

> ...faculty should interact with people in organizations on subjects related to the phenomena about which they teach, perform research, and publish. Business schools need mechanisms through which faculty observe business practices in action so that they may learn the applicability and relevance of the ideas and concepts developed through their intellectual activities.

Corporate sabbaticals. A way of bringing academicians and practitioners together is with corporate sabbaticals. These paid company leaves can be used to allow an individual to share organizational experiences with an academic audience and familiarize faculty and students with business needs and realities. It seems a relatively straightforward way to create a closer correspondence between organizational and academic life.

President Clinton recently spoke of building a bridge to the twenty-first century. Our task is a bit more simple—researchers and practitioners need to build a bridge to each other.

Correlating Industry Needs and Faculty Career Development Needs

For the purposes of our discussion, we shall divide academic careers into the following two categories: (a) pre-tenure, or up to ten years of academic service (PRET<10), and (b) post-tenure, or after ten years of academic service (POST>10).

During the PRET<10 phase, faculty developmental needs and research programs are narrowly focused, methodologically oriented, and geared toward academic publications. Faculty are testing, exploring, and building an inventory of research skills in an effort to gain academic standing and reputation.

A number of support activities can be performed for the benefit of universities, faculties, and even students during this phase. Companies could provide faculty internships that would familiarize the intern with organizational workings and (it is hoped) add value to the firm. In addition, they could provide industry funding for projects that provide background understanding for both faculty and industry members on those issues believed to be especially important.

During the POST>10 phase, faculty developmental needs and research programs should evolve to a more broadly focused agenda emphasizing pragmatic insights into problems. This can be accomplished by developing industry case studies that apply early career interests to organizational functioning. At this stage, faculty should serve as team leaders for joint industry/academic problem-solving teams and be actively involved in training executives. These interactions will serve as a reality test of the knowledge gained up to this point.

During this phase as well, a number of support activities can be performed for the benefit of universities, faculty, and students. Universities need to develop working paper series with industry as the target audience. They should engage in executive education and conduct academic-in-residence/executive-in-residence exchanges. Faculty should be involved in joint team projects in industry on a longitudinal basis. This is also a good time for faculty to write reports "translating" academic research into a business context—following the lead of a number of journals, such as the *Academy of Management Executive, Business Horizons,* and *SAM Advanced Management Journal.* The bottom line is that we can develop a system whereby the needs of business and academic constituencies can be adequately served over the course of an academic career.

The disconnect between the science and practice of management is by no means a new topic in the business press. However, not nearly enough progress has been made to bridge the gap, and we believe there are some particular approaches to take that can help provide a reconnection.

From earliest times, through the rise of the factory system during the industrial revolution and the development of the scientific study of management and organizations, an implicit intention and goal of business education has been to maintain an effective and meaningful dialogue between academicians and practitioners from which both groups could benefit. Business-university partnerships, corporate sabbaticals, and other vehicles we have mentioned here provide potentially effective means to reduce the distance and integrate science and practice.

A Professional Challenge. Our intention is to begin a refocus of our academic and practitioner endeavors toward a more collaborative effort. Many have attempted to confront this problem, but with little movement toward a more integrated focus in the study of management. Some have gone as far as throwing down the gauntlet—too often, though, at the other camp. We would like to challenge our academic colleagues and management practitioners to examine ways in which integration can occur. The next step for us is to survey a large sample of academic researchers and practitioners in an attempt to facilitate this integration.

The disconnect has taken years to develop, and it will take years to bridge the resultant chasm. Are we up to it? Do we care enough about this problem to fix it? ❐

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